



Jocassee Journal

Information and News about the Jocassee Gorges



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The new peregrine falcon overlook, about 250 yards north of Jumping Off Rock, offers the same stunning view of Lake Jocassee, with the added attraction of seeing the amazing aerial maneuvers of the pair of peregrines nesting nearby. The overlook is also more family friendly than Jumping Off Rock. (DNR photos by Mark Hall)

Visitors may see peregrines from new vista

Horsepasture Road to remain open this spring, but Jumping-Off Rock overlook is closed to protect peregrines

While the overlook known as Jumping-Off Rock is closed, a new vista has been created nearby with the same breathtaking view, with the added bonus of giving visitors the chance of seeing nesting peregrines displaying their incredible aerobic maneuvers.

Also, Horsepasture Road will be open in its entirety during the spring season of March 20 through May 10. Last year, a 5-mile section of the road was closed to protect the first year of peregrine nesting there.

In February 2008, Jocassee Gorges Project Manager Mark Hall stumbled upon a

significant find on Jocassee—the state's second known pair of nesting peregrine falcons. Aerial acrobatics, unique perching behavior and protective calls were tell-tale signs that the birds were serious about the nesting site they had chosen near the key geographical feature in Jocassee: Jumping-Off-Rock!



Falcon over Jocassee

Hall called in S.C. Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) bird expert, Laurel Barnhill, to size things up, and she confirmed that the raptors were indeed intent on increasing their numbers in the area. However, both biologists saw that a conflict was imminent because peregrine falcons do not take kindly to human disturbance around their nest sites, especially during a first nesting attempt. Thus, DNR closed the highly popular

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Horsepasture Road to remain open in spring

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area for all uses in 2008, while the agency dropped back to punt and strategize on what to do. It was a difficult and unpopular decision, according to Hall. The birds had chosen one of the most famous overlooks in the upstate and that was a problem, as visitors expected to use the site as they had for decades. But the decision was met with support from area users and the falcons had their peace and quiet.

The peregrines did their part and fledged two healthy young in 2008. That was a critical factor since it cemented their bond with the area. The birds departed with their fledglings in early summer, presumably for the coast, and DNR biologists moved in with notepads, cameras, binoculars and ropes to assess the situation. The actual nest site was found in an incredibly cryptic location amongst the jagged rocks. Peregrines mostly eat other birds, and evidence of their forays of death was scattered below in the form of blue jay, titmice and yellow-shafted flicker (a woodpecker) feathers.

Biologists also identified a prominent, forested hill where an overlook might be developed about 250 yards from the peregrine's favorite perch. The hill had the potential to allow visitors to experience the extraordinary view to which they were accustomed. DNR set its sights on a plan that would close the traditional Jumping-Off Rock cliffs to give the falcons their breathing room, yet allow people to enjoy the scenery as well as the falcons at the same time. Allowing as much public recreation as possible without detriment to the natural resources is often a challenge, according to Hall.

"Playing landscape architect for wild animals has always been one of the most rewarding parts of my job," said Hall. He teamed up with Barnhill and DNR Regional Wildlife Coordinator Tom Swaynham to explore a new site for people to experience the vastness of the area. They decided on the nearby hill and developed a rough plan. Hall returned with Jerry Ledbetter of Sunset Vegetation Management to finalize some construction details and move forward with the change.



The same breathtaking view of Lake Jocassee is offered at the new overlook north of Jumping Off Rock, but visitors will be able to enjoy a safer experience while also possibly seeing a speedy fly-by of peregrine falcons. (DNR photo by Mark Hall)

About 2 acres of trees were felled to provide the new view of the falcon's site as well as the surroundings. The area was landscaped with a natural touch with a pathway leading to the new overview. Bill McNeely of LBM Industries in Sapphire, N.C., gave DNR a special price on the boulders used at the site. When it was completed on Jan. 1, all those involved exclaimed that it turned out better than they had expected.

DNR hopes the public will feel the same way about the new vista at Jumping-Off Rock. No doubt, many parents who visit with children will feel more at ease, since the new site does not have the life-threatening drop-off like the one at Jumping-Off Rock. Safety was always a concern there. DNR will make good on its promise to reopen the road to public use in spring 2009. The section of road near the cliffs is closed to foot traffic, stopping and/or parking of vehicles. Shortly after construction was completed, the falcons returned and were spotted on Jan. 7. Outdoor enthusiasts will be able to watch the falcons as they patrol the treetops in search of prey, and they might be lucky enough to see some aerial dives or other mating behavior in March.

"We are always on that tight-rope, trying to balance the needs of the resource versus the desire of people to enjoy our wild lands," Hall said. "I think we've come up with a solution to keep that equilibrium in place this time." ❁

DNR reducing wild hog population on Jocassee Gorges

U.S. Department of Agriculture conducting DNA tests on feral swine

Numerous herds of feral swine have sporadically appeared on Jocassee Gorges in the last few years. Jocassee Gorges Project Manager Mark Hall suspects the feral swine were illegally transported and released in the area.

“Some misguided hunters want to have hogs to hunt,” Hall said, “but they have probably not thought it out in terms of impacts to trout streams and influence on the bear population.” Feral swine rip up small streams and consume acorns before the bears and wild turkeys get a chance to eat. They are voracious consumers and their reproductive rate is about 20 times higher than that of the black bear, according to Hall.

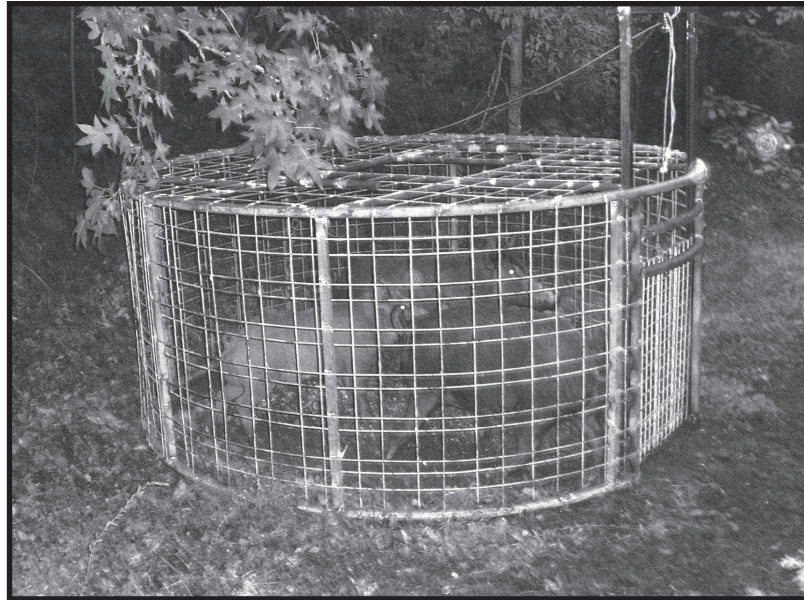
Jocassee Gorges wildlife technicians trapped and disposed of more than 150 hogs in the Jocassee area in the last three years. In 2008, trapping was more difficult, as the DNR trappers had removed quite a few animals the year before.

“The reduction in trapping success shows that we are making some progress in reducing the feral swine population,” Hall said. The carcasses are given to children’s homes or people in the community who want some meat to barbecue. Hall and his technicians are also teaming up with neighbors such as the Cliffs Communities and S.C. State Parks, who have also experienced hog problems. DNR has loaned its traps to the neighbors and plans to purchase several more in the near future for use on Jocassee as well as adjacent lands. DNR is spearheading the effort to get everyone in the

area involved in reducing hog numbers.

A “partner” in the regional effort is one of the predators found on Jocassee—the coyote. Although biologists wish the coyote had not returned to Jocassee, they have found a significant amount of pig hair in coyote droppings across the property.

“It looks like the coyotes are killing a lot of the smaller pigs, and that is helping keep their numbers down,” said Ronnie Gravely, DNR wildlife technician. DNR has also partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to put extra pressure on the Jocassee swine population. APHIS uses special infra-red night hunting equipment and scopes to zero in upon and ensure rapid death to the foreign invaders.



Wild hogs trapped on Jocassee Gorges await a barbecue and pig-pickin'. (DNR photo by Jimmy Kluge)

Snipers use carefully calibrated rifles to harvest the animals. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted DNA tests to help DNR identify the source of the feral swine, and the results have generated some leads as to the origin of the swine. Overall disease profiles for brucellosis, vesicular stomatitis, pseudorabies and similar diseases indicated the feral swine in the area were relatively “clean.”

“We’ll probably have to live with a few lone hogs combing the mountainsides,” Hall said, “but we will not tolerate herds of wild hogs tearing up our trout streams, impacting water quality, eating salamanders and consuming the foods our native wildlife depend on.”

Hall said he plans to make wild hogs the most “endangered species” on Jocassee. “They will certainly be ‘in-danger’ because we are going to hound them until it is hard to find a hog track on Jocassee,” he said. 🌿



Table Rock State Park's ever-popular cabins are getting a historic facelift. All of the work is being done to accurately reflect the time when the cabins were built, under FDR's New Deal program, with an eye on incorporating modern standards.

Cabins at Table Rock getting new look, old feel

Renovations must follow strict standards due to cabins' historic nature

The historic cabins at Table Rock State Park are getting a serious makeover. The first phase of restoring the structures to their original condition, albeit with some modern conveniences, is well under way, according to the S.C. State Park Service.

Four of the 14 cabins, all on one loop, are being upgraded first, said Phil Gaines, director of the State Park Service and a Pickens County native who grew up in and around the 3,000-acre park on the Blue Ridge.

The cabins were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps just before World War II and, along with numerous other structures at the park, including its iconic lodge, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

That means renovations have to meet strict Department of Interior standards to retain their "parkitecture" integrity, Gaines said,

with consideration given to aesthetics such as buying new furniture with the heavy wood feel of period pieces from that time, while at the same time upgrading wiring and plumbing and expanding the small bathrooms.

This is the second major project of its kind at Table Rock. Restoration and renovation of the lodge was completed in 2005.

The cabin project began about two years ago and is being funded through reinvestment of Park Service revenue, Gaines said, adding that similar work is underway on the opposite side of the state, on the CCC cabins at Edisto Beach State Park.

"Finances dictate the speed of these projects, but equally important is the very meticulous pace that proper stewardship dictates we take in this kind of work," Gaines said. "As we learned in restoring the lodge, when you start dealing with an historic structure, you never know what you're getting into until you get in to it." ❁

Double Springs campsites on Lake Jocassee to see changes in 2009

Backcountry campsites are now open for reservations by toll-free call, online

In an effort to provide better quality customer service, the Double Springs boat-in campsites on the shore of Lake Jocassee will soon be open for advanced reservations.

In the past, these sites were only available on a first-come, first-served basis. Starting on Feb. 1, 2009, like all of the other facilities at Devils Fork State Park, these backcountry campsites will be open for reservations through Reserve America.

"Before when someone would call and want to know if we had any openings at Double Springs, we would tell them that we had an opening," said Kevin Evans, Devils Fork State Park manager. "But since it was all first-come, first-served, it may not be available when they arrived. But opening that area to reservations, we are able to serve our customers better by letting them make reservations and know exactly if they would be able to camp there. It will also allow us to better manage that area."

The rates for these sites will also change. Previously the rates were assessed on a per-

person basis, and a six-person campsite would come to a total of about \$30 per night. Now the rate for that same site will be a flat \$18 prior to taxes and fees. The rates for the different

sites at Double Springs will vary, depending on the number of tent pads provided on each site. Some sites have one tent pad while others have two or three. All guests, including those with reservations, are required to check-in at the Devils Fork State Park information center prior to occupying a site and fill out an additional on-site registration form. The regulations for the Double Springs boat-in site will remain the same, some

of which include no pets, no alcohol, no radios, all tents must fit on provided 12-by-12 tent pad, and you must remember to pack it in, pack it out.

With more than 80,000 acres of protected lands from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the sand dunes of the Atlantic, South Carolina State Parks protect some of the most inviting natural, cultural and recreational destinations in the United States.

Reservations can be made by calling the toll free reservation line a 1-800-345-PARK (7275) or online at www.southcarolinaparks.com.



Campsites at the remote Double Springs camping area on Lake Jocassee can now be reserved by phone or online, just like other State Parks locations. Here Jake Arthur of Charlotte relaxes at Double Springs a few years ago on a camping trip with his father, Randy Arthur.



Joy and misery on

Clemson students complete speed hike of 76-mile trail from Table Rock to Oconee State Park in less than 44 hours

By Boykin Lucas

In November 2008, Eric Owensby, Kevin Ferguson, and myself did a lightweight two-day hike of the Foothills Trial. We started on Friday night, Nov. 7, around 6 o'clock, and finished early on Sunday afternoon, Nov. 9. It was spontaneous and not particularly well planned—we talked about it for a week and made the decision to go on Thursday night. Initially, our goal was to see how quickly we could do it, but this changed into completing it in less than 48 hours once we got on the trail.

The first night we spent about nine hours on the trail. Eric's mom dropped us off at the Table Rock trailhead. Initially we made really good progress, but then started to get rained on about halfway to Sassafras Mountain. This made for pretty miserable hiking with all the fall leaves on the trail; it was really slippery and hard to follow in a few places between the darkness, low visibility (very misty) and autumn leaves. We decided to hike until the rain stopped and, thus, ended up spending a very cold, and somewhat damp, night (from about 3:30 to 7 a.m.) about



Clemson students Eric Owensby (left) and Boykin Lucas p... a thru-hike of the 76-mile Foothills Trail in less than 44 h... Rock State Park in northern Pickens County. (Photos by C...



Speed hikers (from left) Eric Owensby and Kevin Ferguson traverse the Foothills Trail near Gorges State Park in North Carolina (Photo by Boykin Lucas)

a mile and a half from Lake Jocassee.

We were hiking by about 7:30 the next morning. The Duke Energy-maintained sections of the trail were really great; they were very well maintained. These trail sections were also perhaps a little less used than other sections because of the distances to easily accessible access points. We made it to the Bad Creek Access area about an hour before sunset on Saturday, giving us a bit over 50 miles in 24 hours. Kevin was bonking pretty hard and decided to call it day—fortunately he was able to (barely) get a roommate on his mobile for a ride. After Kevin had a ride lined up Eric and I pushed on.



the Foothills Trail



ause for a breather at Oconee State Park after completing
ours Nov. 7-9, 2008. The pair began their trek at Table
Cat Opalka)

Eric's parents met us at Whitewater Falls about
an hour later with beef stew, dry socks, and
some much needed extra food. It was amazing!

We kept going until about 1:20
a.m., when a planned stop turned
into an unplanned bivouac on the
side of the trail under our poncho
liners. We were both pretty wrecked
and basically just passed out after
stopping. I would estimate that we
were about a mile from Burrell's
Ford Road. At this point, neither
of us was sure if we were going to
finish.

We crashed for about six hours in what
was a very cold night (35 degrees) under our
thin poncho liners. There was definitely a bit of

huddling for warmth going on. Both of us were
in pretty bad shape the next morning: really
tired, feet in miserable shape. But we talked
about it and decided that if we'd gone this far
we were going to finish. I'm not sure we could
have gotten any mobile signal in the Chattooga
Gorge even if we had wanted to quit.

We got on the trail by 7:30 a.m., were at
Burrell's Ford before 8 a.m. and at the Oconee
State Park trailhead by 1:30 p.m. Eric came up
with the crazy idea that we should run the last
six miles from SC 107 to the trailhead. It was a
great way to finish out. Even better, Cat Opalka,
Eric's girlfriend, and Thomas Moore had hiked
out to meet us and ran the last three miles
with us. Not only did they pick us up but they
brought food as well! The hike was great, misery
aside, but it was even better to finish. ❁

*Boykin Lucas is a senior at Clemson University and
a member of the Foothills Trail Conference.*

*(Editor's note: A Dec. 30, 2008, article in The Greenville
News written by Mike Foley reported that ultramarathoner
Matt Kirk completed the Foothills Trail in 16 hours and
52 minutes on March 5, 2005. While the Foothills Trail
Conference does not maintain any official speed records,
Kirk's 2005 traverse of the rigorous trail is the "fastest
known time," or FKT—a term used to describe such
"unofficial" records.)*



Eric Owensby (left) and Boykin Lucas are all smiles
after running to finish the 76-mile Foothills Trail.
The Clemson students completed the entire trail in
less than 44 hours and slept only about nine hours
along the way.



Foothills Trail Conference celebrates 35 years

Volunteer organization will mark milestone with hikes to complete the entire trail during 2009

The Foothills Trail Conference will celebrate 35 years of existence in 2009, and one of the events marking this anniversary will be a series of sequential hikes that will span the entire 76 miles of the trail.

The Foothills Trail Conference was officially organized and established on May 22, 1974, with the purpose of “the coordination of groups and individuals interested in advancing completion, use and maintenance of the Foothills Trail.”

To mark the 35th anniversary, the Foothills Trail Conference will offer a series of sequential hikes that will allow participants to complete the entire Foothills Trail in nine separate hikes. The first hike will be March 21 from Oconee State Park to Nicholson Ford Road, and the last hike will be Nov. 7 from Sassafras Mountain to Table Rock State Park, during the Foothills Trail Conference’s annual meeting.

Pre-registration is required for all hikes. For more information or to register, contact the Foothills Trail Conference at info@foothillstrail.org or call (864) 467-9537.

A love of the Appalachian foothills united the creators of the Foothills Trail Conference, but few records exist describing the inception of the trail in the mid-1960s. The concept of an extensive trail occurred to several individuals, but the U.S. Forest Service started initial trail construction in Sumter National Forest in 1968. By 1970, many agencies had developed a conceptual route for a trail joining Table Rock and Oconee state parks.

The development of the Bad Creek Hydroelectric Project west of the Whitewater River played an important role in the completion of the Foothills Trail. In order to construct Bad Creek in northern Oconee County, Duke Power Co. (now Duke Energy) had to obtain a license from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, and part of



The Foothills Trail crosses the Toxaway River and many other rivers and streams and scenic landmarks on its journey of 76 miles between Oconee State Park and Table Rock State Park. The Foothills Trail Conference marks its 35th anniversary this year. (DNR photo by Greg Lucas)

the licensing requirement was to provide for recreational opportunities on the lake to be created, Bad Creek Reservoir. Since the 300-acre Bad Creek lake would have extreme level fluctuations due to its role in pumped storage, and not be suitable for recreation, the concept of developing the hiking trail across Duke lands from Table Rock to Upper Whitewater Falls entered the picture.

Glenn Hilliard, president of Liberty Life Insurance Corp.; Bill Lee, president of Duke Power Co.; and Herman Hermelink, president of Crescent Land and Timber Corp. (Duke’s land-holding subsidiary), set the stage for establishing the missing trail link between Table Rock State Park and the Upper Whitewater Falls trails.

Hilliard was instrumental in forming the Foothills Trail Conference, an organization that would serve as the uniting body among land managers of various sections of the trail and to establish management continuity along the length of the trail. Hilliard is still the chair emeritus of the Foothills Trail Conference Board of Directors.

Over the past 35 years, many people have enjoyed hiking the nearly 100 miles of trails that make up the Foothills Trail and its spurs. Many of the hikers have become members and have volunteered their time to maintain and construct parts of the trail. In 2008, the Foothills Trail Conference published its fifth edition of the trail guidebook. —



Johnson Controls of West Union recently donated \$1,000 to the Foothills Trail Conference, but its donation didn't stop there—a number of Johnson Control employees showed up for this Foothills Trail maintenance day in January, and other trail work days are planned in the near future. (Photo by Heyward Douglass)

Johnson Controls donates \$1,000 to Foothills Trail Conference

Employees pitch in at work day on Foothills Trail in Oconee County

In an effort to improve the condition of local natural resources and support educational efforts focused on the environment, Johnson Controls of West Union has presented a \$1,000 check to the Foothills Trail Conference.

"Johnson Controls sponsors a Blue Sky initiative corporately, and to participate in that program, we submitted a request for funds on behalf of a nonprofit, environmentally friendly organization," said Jeff May, Johnson Controls plant manager in Oconee County, at the presentation ceremony in the Seneca area.

"There is a requirement that employees from the plant actually volunteer their services. So we're pretty excited going forward. We submitted the Foothills Trail Conference for consideration, and we were lucky enough to get a \$1,000 donation from the corporate office of Johnson Controls."

The donation will aid the Foothills Trail Conference with trail maintenance. A

number of Johnson Controls employees who are interested in helping with trail maintenance volunteered their services. On Jan. 10, some of these employees and their family members, including seven children, contributed 30 man-hours during a work day on the Foothills Trail in Oconee County. Another work day is planned for February or March of this year.

The Foothills Trail winds through Upstate South Carolina and North Carolina. The primary purpose of the Foothills Trail Conference, a volunteer member organization, is to maintain the trail for outdoor enthusiasts.

"We're obviously delighted with Johnson Controls selection of the Foothills Trail to participate in their program," said Heyward Douglass, a member of the Foothills Trail Conference board of directors and a former chairman. "We intend to use the funds for a new program to improve the signage across the whole Foothills Trail, which is about 100 miles of trail through the mountains. So this could not come at a better time as far as we're concerned." ❁

Prescribed burns at Jocassee Gorges restoring habitat

Chance of wildfire to Jocassee Gorges' neighbors reduced by prescribed fire

Many species and ecosystems require fire periodically to ensure their survival, and that's why prescribed burns are a part of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources' management of the Jim Timmerman Natural Resources Area at Jocassee Gorges. People in the Upstate might have seen smoke signals emerging from the mountaintops north of SC 11 in Pickens County in the past few months.

"The objective of the prescribed burns going on this winter is to maintain the ecological integrity of these lands," said Mark Hall, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife biologist and forest planner, "and to provide for human safety by reducing the amount of fuel, thereby reducing the chance of catastrophic wildfire. For many of these ecosystems, it's not a matter of 'if' they will burn, but rather 'when.' We like to choose the 'when.'"

Burning was done when the weather is suitable to allow for a safe burn, including the rapid rising and dispersal of smoke, Hall said. Once weather conditions are right for the burn, it usually takes four to eight hours for the active burning to be completed, although scattered stumps, logs and dead trees may smolder slowly through the night. Fires were surrounded by fire breaks, which include existing preserve roads, streams, plowed fire breaks and breaks put in with hand tools in sensitive areas.

"Through the centuries, many native plants, animals and habitats in the southeastern United States have adapted to the presence of recurring fire," Hall said. "Many species and ecosystems are now rare because of fire suppression, and they actually need fire to ensure their survival. We've burned about 2,000 acres in the last four years to help restore natural processes in the system."

Hall emphasized that since controlled burning requires careful timing and a thorough knowledge of weather and fire behavior, highly trained fire personnel with the DNR and S.C. Forestry Commission manage and conduct all aspects of the controlled burns.

"Besides the ecological benefits of prescribed fire, it also has the added benefit of reducing fuel on the forest floor and lessening the chances of a catastrophic fire, which can threaten homes and people," Hall said. "Because fire has been suppressed for so long in some places, you get dangerous buildups of fuel and increase the chances for a wildfire that can destroy property and lives. The wildfires we've seen across the United States in the last 15 years, due in large part to past fire suppression, underscore the need for prescribed fire."

By using a controlled burn—when wind, temperature and humidity conditions are appropriate to remove some of the forest fuel like leaves, pine needles and twigs—fire managers can greatly reduce the chances of a catastrophic wildfire. After controlled burns are completed, the homes and properties close to Jocassee Gorges will be much less likely to be in the path of a wildfire, because the fuel is reduced or eliminated.

Optimal weather conditions are chosen for smoke dispersal, but Hall advised that during these controlled burns nearby residents will certainly see and smell smoke. The smoke usually disappears by the end of the day.

"People become upset when there is smoke in the air if they don't know the reason for the fire," Hall said. "That's why we're trying to get the word out about prescribed fire. If we carefully plan and conduct a burn when weather conditions favor smoke dispersal, this reduces smoke-related problems. Dealing with a little bit of smoke now is infinitely better than trying to control a raging wildfire later." ❁



Prescribed fire plays an integral role in the management of wildlife and plant communities in Jocassee Gorges, where the DNR has burned more than 2,000 acres in the last four years. (DNR photo by Greg Lucas)



A good acorn crop in Oconee County helped bear hunters there take 18 bears during the two-week October 2008 bear season. Bear hunting is allowed only in the three mountain counties of Pickens, Oconee and Greenville. (DNR photo by Skip Still)

Bear hunters busy during recent season

Harvest ranks as fourth-best in state history

A total harvest of 46 bears ranks as the fourth-highest total on record for South Carolina during the fall 2008 mountain bear season.

The 46-bear harvest was a solid number, according to Ronnie Gravely, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife technician, but it could have been better.

“We were hoping for more with all the nuisance bear complaints that we’ve had,” said Gravely. “But we had some good-sized bears taken—four or five over 400 pounds and four or five over 300 pounds.”


A hunting party under huntmaster Mike Morgan bagged a trio of big bears in Pickens County, which topped the three-county hunting area with 19 bears harvested. Scott Gilstrap of Pickens killed a 410-pound bear, Isaac Case of Pickens bagged a 385-pounder and Robert Chapman added a 275-pound bear

in one of the group’s best seasons.

Hunting conditions were good, primarily due to a spotty white oak acorn crop that resulted in plenty of bears on the move.

Oconee County produced 18 bears for hunters, while Greenville County yielded nine bears.

“You’ve got very good bear habitat in Oconee County, with 85,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land,” said Jason Davis, DNR wildlife technician. “And looking at the mast surveys, most areas didn’t have anywhere near the acorn production that Oconee County, northeast Georgia and southwest North Carolina had. Above 3,000 feet in elevation, we had a bumper crop of acorns in some areas, and that’s the bear’s main food source.”

For more information on black bear in South Carolina, visit the DNR Web site at <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/bear/index.html>. 

'Bat gate' protects Stumphouse Mountain mammals

At least six species of bats live on and around Stumphouse Mountain

Contractors with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources recently protected both the tunnel and its inhabitants by installing a "bat gate" just inside the mouth of Middle Tunnel at Stumphouse Mountain in northern Oconee County.

A recent survey by Mary Bunch, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife biologist, about 130 bats—mainly Eastern pipistrelles and a handful of endangered Rafinesque's big-eared bats—call the Middle Tunnel home.

"That number will grow now with this additional protection," Bunch said.

Installing the gate took two days labor from employees of Bat Works, a South Dakota specialty firm, which wedged steel beams into place. The gate allows the bats to fly past it from their cave

roosts, but doesn't allow humans to enter.

The Rafinesque's big-eared bat is a South Carolina endangered species, according to Bunch, while the Eastern pipistrelles are fairly common. Protecting bats with such gates is common, said Joe Tigner, owner of Bat Works, who builds gates and works nationwide on other bat projects.

"The reason we build gates is so they don't become endangered," Tigner said. "It's a way of protecting them. They have very low reproduction rates." Preventing disruption by humans in the winter increases bat survival.

At least six species of bats live in the Stumphouse Mountain area: Northern long-eared bats, Eastern pipistrelles, red bats, Rafinesque's big-eared bats, little brown bats and big brown bats.

A single bat can eat nearly its entire weight in insects each night, according to Tigner. "In the Southeast, all our bats are insectivores," he said. "They aren't aggressive, unless you're an insect."



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